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ABSTRACT

The use of microcomputers as word processors for writing papers is commonplace in English departments, but there are many less well-known uses that English teachers can make of the computer. For example, word processing programs can be used to teach sentence combining. Moving text on the screen is very easy, so it is possible to rearrange words or phrases and to discuss the differences these changes make in meaning or sentence flow. Computers are also helpful for demonstrating revision and group composing, with teachers going through the processes with students to help them understand the changes that can easily be manipulated on the screen. While writing research papers, students can prepare a preliminary question outline on the computer, save the outline on disk, and answer the questions as they do their research. Or students and teachers can use a computer unit with both large screen and small screen monitors. The students can watch the large-screen monitor while the teacher types, watching the small screen. (HTH)

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Computers As Instructional Aids

(from a paper presented at the Greater St. Louis English Teachers Association Spring Conference in St. Louis, MO on April 11, 1986

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Computers As Instructional Aids

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The computer as word processor for writing papers is a familiar piece of equipment in English departments across the country by now. However, many of the other uses an English teacher can make of the computer may not be as well-known. At Hazelwood West High School, our Writing Lab keeps a computer, double disk drive, and monitor on a portable cart. This unit, combined with a large-screen monitor (25 inch) which is mounted on another portable cart, is available for teachers to check out for use in their classrooms as instructional tools. I have found this combination to be an invaluable aid in several ways.

For example, the computer with a word processing program loaded is unsurpassed for teaching sentence combining. The teacher can prepare a disk with the sentence clusters to be combined and then have students in class take turns writing different combinations on the screen. Moving text on the screen is very easy, so it is possible to rearrange words or phrases and discuss what differences the changes make in meaning or sentence flow. No matter how many combinations are tried nor how many changes are made, if the teacher does not save the student versions on the disk, the original version of the clusters is still unchanged for the next class to use. Students seem to be much more engaged in the sentence combining on the computer than they are when we do it on an overhead projector with transparencies or when we do it on the chalkboard.

I have found the computer very helpful also in demonstrating to a class what revision means. I type and save on a disk either something I have written or something the students have written -- often I use one

paragraph each from several student papers. Then the class and I together talk through a revision and make the changes as we discuss them. Again, we can change our minds as often as we want, because we can delete or add or insert any time or place we want to. Going through this process with the students is the best way I have found to help them understand that revision is more than correcting mechanical errors. The disk will still contain only the original version as I typed it, unless I save the changes. Therefore, the lesson is intact for the next class.

Another way I use the computer as a demonstration tool involves group composing. If I want to teach the class how to write a precis, for example, I bring in the portable computer, give the students a handout of a short article, and demonstrate how I write a precis of the article. I "think aloud" as I write it on the computer, so the students can hear what kind of decisions I am making, and I ask for their suggestions. In this case, I usually save what I've written and have copies made for the students to keep as a sample. Having watched and listened and participated in the writing of the sample makes it much more meaningful to the students than a sample I might hand out without going through the process of writing it with them. I use this same method for teaching ways to compose other kinds of expository writing. The idea is not that the students must write as I do, but that they can see one person's thinking processes as composing takes place and contribute their own suggestions.

When my students write research papers, they first prepare a preliminary question outline on the computers in the Writing Lab. They save their outlines on disks and answer the questions as they do their research. They are able to enter the answers they are finding under the appropriate questions in their outlines. Then, when their research is finished, they can print their question outline with answers to use as a guide in preparing

a final outline. Often, I take a few of these final outlines, which are on each student's disk, and use them with copies of the question outline and answers. I load the final outline into the computer so the students can see it on the monitor, and together the students and I discuss how to use the notes to write a paper. As we make decisions about what notes support which point, I can demonstrate how to write them in the paper so that it becomes a coherent piece of writing. It is also a good time to discuss and demonstrate synthesizing of ideas. In additions, I can show the students what I mean by introducing borrowed material and documenting it. The capability of teaching lessons this way makes a more vivid impression on the learners than any other method I have tried.

To use a computer unit and large-screen monitor in the classroom, certain special equipment is needed. You need a way to attach both the small monitor and the large monitor to the keyboard unit. The teacher needs to see the small monitor as she/he types, and the class watches the large monitor. To make the attachment requires a cord that will attach three ways. We use a three-pronged male RCA plug. Two of these link the keyboard and small monitor. The third goes into an extension cord from the large monitor; the extension cord has a female RCA plug on one end and a male RCA plug on the other end. The female end plugs into the three-way cord from the keyboard; the male end goes into the proper slot on the back of the monitor.

To enable the students to read the monitor, you need a 40-column display. This means removing the 80-column card from the keyboard unit unless you use a word processing program that enables you to turn off the 80-column capability. The size of the letters and the resolution still are not perfect, but the text can be read by most students from anywhere in the room. If they have difficulty, I ask them to move closer to the large

monitor. Because the text is difficult for some students to read, when it is feasible I also give the students copies of the material I am going to use on the computer. For example, when we do sentence combining, I usually give them a copy of the cluster sentences to work on. We still do the combining on the computer, but they can read the clusters more easily on their copies.

Projectors that will project the image from the monitor onto a screen are available now, but they are very expensive. Such a projector would be ideal, of course, because the students would have no difficulty reading the text as it appeared on a screen. However, until such a luxury is available, the large-screen monitor works very well. It allows me to teach certain lessons about writing in a more effective way than I have ever found before.